

## ***The Atonement in the Epistle to the Hebrews***<sup>1</sup>

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ONE OF THE many hymns written by Charles Wesley, that active member of the Oxford Methodists who none the less remained faithful to the Anglican Church, perfectly and vigorously expresses the quintessential nature of the reign and priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Beginning 'Hail the day that sees Him rise', the hymn continues :

‘Still for us He intercedes,  
His prevailing death He pleads,  
Near Himself prepares our place,  
He the first-fruits of our race:

Alleluia!

Here, in a moment, we are brought face to face with what is for the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews his central category of thought and interpretation, which draws together the theology of the Epistle and gives it its distinctive character. For him, 'priesthood' is more than a mere springboard for some disquisition on moral truth; it is life and spirit. It is no precious accident, indeed, that Dr. Alexander Nairne's famous work on this Epistle, an Epistle which almost begins as it ends with a reference to the priestly work of Christ, is called *The Epistle of Priesthood* (1915) .

We shall not quarrel, I imagine, with those scholars who wish to place the Epistle to the Hebrews in a Judaic-Alexandrian setting. M. Clavier, in the new volume in memory of T. W. Manson, *New Testament Essays* (1959), notes that this ascription is scarcely contestable, 'et rarement contestée'. As it happens the Dean Emeritus of Jesus College in this University has queried the presence of a Jewish hand in the Epistle — 'a very strange Jew, if so' — but we may grant without doubt that

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our consideration of the Atonement in *Hebrews* must proceed against a background of contrasted world-orders as Platonic as it is Philonic. This will govern the writer's total conception of reality and finality with reference to the death of Christ, and give us the clue to his understanding of its significance.

In his article on 'The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews' in the Dodd *Festschrift*, to which we shall return, C. Kingsley Barrett has pointed out the link which exists in this Epistle between atonement and eschatology, and the close contact which is maintained as a result with the line of primitive Christian theology. We are, of course, already aware of the characteristic tension in *Hebrews* between ἐφάπαξ and πάντοτε in its theology of atonement. But it is significant that the priestly work of Christ on the Cross is seen by our writer not in splendid and discontinuous isolation, but as part of a whole redemptive movement initiated by the grace of God (2: 9, which is in fact the only reference to the love of God in the Epistle).

In the section 1:1-10:18, the writer expounds the doctrines of the person of Christ in terms of revelation (1:3), and the work of Christ in terms of redemption (4-10). And just as pre-existence and incarnation feature in the christological section, so the death of Christ in chapters 4-10 is conceived as the focus of a vast doctrinal sweep which begins with the incarnation, includes the exaltation and anticipates the second advent. The doctrinal summary which opens the Epistle, for example, places the reference to the καθαρισμὸν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν (1-3) firmly within the context of descent and ascent, of Bethlehem and the Mount of Ascension. The same is true of 2:9 where Christ's 'tasting of death for everyone' (R.S.V.) picks up the pattern of humiliation and exaltation which forms the basis of Psalm 8 — a pattern which finds its new fulfilment in Him who was made for a little time (or, with Westcott, 'a little', *ad loc.*) lower than the angels, and who was eventually crowned with glory and honour.

And this is of course an imperative part of the writer's theology of priesthood. He is steadily resisting any interpretation of the priestly office which regards it as simply institutional. But throughout his exposition of its eternal character, he is

equally anxious to safeguard any suggestion that Christ was sufficiently unlike any other priest for His ministry in these terms to become ineffectual. This is the reason for the famous insistence on the humanity of our Lord throughout the Epistle (4: 15, *passim*); and it leads Père Spicq in his commentary in the *Études Bibliques* series (1952) to conclude, in his note on 2 : 14ff., that the death of Christ is 'envisagée dans le prolongement direct et comme immédiat dans l'incarnation'.

Nor is it simply, as even Dr. Leon Morris seems to imply in his christological study *The Lord from Heaven* (1958), that our Lord went through fear and learning of obedience and strong crying and tears ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ as an exemplary trial run, so to speak, just to show that it could be done. The suffering involved in the incarnation and life and ministry of Jesus, as well as in the obedience of the Cross, was surely suffering at its deepest level, a 'sympathy' which was the real and tragic outcome of an identification with those He came to save as complete, and in the widest sense priestly, in the βάπτισμα of the Cross as in the river Jordan itself.

We must turn in detail, then, to the work of Christ in Hebrews, and consider its character and its achievement. In his study of the teaching of this Epistle in *The Cross of Christ* (1956), Dr. Vincent Taylor discusses the Atonement in Hebrews in both its vicarious and representative aspects. He is here summarizing the important and detailed findings he reported in *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching* (1940), where he came to the conclusion that a priestly ministry of Christ which is undertaken on our behalf and as our representative, is as far as the Greek and the theology of the Epistle in these respects will allow us to go.

Now clearly both these notes are axiomatic for the thought and argument of the writer. Jesus tasted death ὑπὲρ παντός (2:9); He now appears before the face of God ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν (9:24); and He ever lives to make intercession ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν (7:25). Similarly, Christ is a merciful and faithful High Priest *secundum ordinem Melchizedek*, εἰς τὸ ἰλάσκεσθαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας τοῦ λαοῦ (2:17), who is not only given a name which, as Dr. Taylor says, 'itself implies a representative office', but also effects a ministry which is 'for us' to the extent that we can claim,

this High Priest as our own: τοιοῦτον ἐξομεν ἀρχιερέα (8:1; cp. 10:21).

But have we proceeded along this line as far as we may. Dr. James Denney, for one, does not think so. His argument, in *The Death of Christ*, is rotated around the unavoidable relation he discovers in *Hebrews* between sin and death, the focus of which becomes clear in 9: 14: 'Christ, who through the eternal Spirit (διὰ Πνεῦματος αἰωνίου) offered himself without blemish to God'. The phrase διὰ Πνεῦματος αἰωνίου has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Calvin suggests that the thought is that of the death of Christ becoming saving to us through the power of the Holy Spirit; Bishop Westcott and Père Spicq take it to mean that in the sacrificial act of suffering the divine personality of Jesus (πνεῦμα) was in complete harmony with the Spirit of God (πνεῦμα αἰώνιον); while Denney himself believes that the use of αἰώνιος in association with πνεῦμα means that 'Christ's offering of Himself without spot to God has an absolute or ideal character'.

We shall begin to see the significance of this verse, which is central to the writer's description of Jesus' entry into the Holy Place (9: 12), anticipated by the shadowy σκηνή (9: 3), when we recall the character of God and the nature of sin as these appear in *Hebrews*. God is 'the living God' (3: 12 *et al.*), who reveals Himself in the activities of creation (11:3), incarnation (1:2) and judgment (4:12 and 12:23). Although the description of God as 'a consuming fire' (12:29), to whom worship reverence and awe are due (28), is austere as well as majestic, it is important to see that the irruption of sin, which the writer considers with intense seriousness, constitutes both the reason for God's holy reaction in judgment (10:26ff., though this refers in particular to the condition of apostasy), and the ground for His redemptive activity in Christ. As a result God, who has established the new covenant, anticipated by Jeremiah, finally and fully in Christ, has provided the way for men to 'draw nigh' to Him (7:29), so that faith becomes well-pleasing to Him (chapter 11), and He can equip men with everything good to do His will (13:21).

The question, however, remains. The sacrificial offering of Jesus, which replaces once and for all the types of the priesthood

of Melchizedek and the Levitical ritual, provides the basis for a new relationship of fellowship between God and men (described by Paul in terms of *καταλλαγή* and by this author in terms of entrance to the Holiest), and makes response from man's side not only possible but also imperative. What has made the difference? Vincent Taylor is prepared to see that the act of redemption is accomplished by Christ alone, since man is 'incapable of effecting the removal of sin'. But he is unwilling to admit that language of this kind even grazes the edge of substitution. If, none the less, we can now draw nigh to the Holy Place by a new and living way opened for us in the curtain of Christ's own body (10:19ff.), where before we were excluded, are we compelled to rule out the possibility that the priestly work of Christ on the Cross of Calvary is the indispensable middle term in this progression? In this sense, at least, the sacrificial action of Christ, by which He achieves something for men that could not otherwise be achieved, and which becomes therefore the ground of man's acceptance by God, may be regarded as substitutionary.

We have thought of the character of the death of Christ in this Epistle as vicarious, representative and, in the allowed sense, substitutionary. We must consider now the sacrificial nature of the Atonement in Hebrews. The notion of covenant is of course central to the writer's treatment of the Cross as a sacrifice. Against a background of Old Testament service and ceremonial, tabernacle and Tishri, the writer describes for the benefit of his Jewish readers, for whom the significance of this ethos would be immediate, the character of the new covenant, replacing the old, of which the Lord Jesus Christ is both the inauguration and the pledge. Superior to Moses in the sphere of history, and to Aaron in the sphere of salvation, Jesus by virtue of His inherent nature — 'He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature' (1:3) — is able to become not only Priest on our behalf, since He shares our nature, but also Victim in our stead, since His offering is uniquely ἄμωμος (9:14). And the quality of His priesthood and priestly action is distinctively abiding: 'Thou art a priest for ever, After the order of Melchizedek' (7: 17).

As such, the work of Christ as High Priest takes on a radically

different character from that typical of the Levitical system. Indeed, argues the writer, had it been otherwise, there would have been no need for 'another priest to arise' of the line of Melchizedek rather than of Aaron (7:11). His work is therefore able to become universally effective in the moral and not simply the ceremonial sphere, dealing with the συνείδησις of the worshipper, and not only with 'food and drink and various ablutions' (9:10). In line with this, the sacrifice of Christ is able to effect a redemption from transgression (παράβασις) and not merely from error (ἄγνότημα, 9:15 and 7).

Furthermore, it is of the very essence of the death of Christ, as Père Spicq reminds us in his commentary on 9:14, that it should be a *voluntary* self-surrender (cp. 9:25). As true as this remains, we are not allowed to forget that the event of Calvary falls within the total *schema* of God (cp. Acts 2: 23 and Romans 3: 25), so that without any apparent contradiction our author is able to speak also of Christ being once offered (ὁ χριστὸς ἅπαξ προσενεχθείς, 9:28). And in this capacity he bore the sin of many, by the offering of His own blood. Scholarly debate has raged around the meaning of the biblical term αἷμα, and the gulf between 'life released' and (Westcott and Dewar) 'life yielded in death' (Dr. Morris and Mr. Stibbs) remains unbridged. For our purposes it is sufficient to notice that the self-sacrifice of Christ went to the effective limit of redemptive suffering; it was a suffering unto death διὰ τοῦ ἰδίου αἵματος (9: 12).

So much for the character and scope of the death of Christ in *Hebrews*. But the writer does not end here. His is a practical as much as a theological task, and for this reason he is anxious that his Hebrew Christian readers should see Jesus not merely as Victim and Priest, but also as Priest and King. It is this High Priest whom we have, who has not only accomplished his sacrificial and priestly work on the Cross, but also been exalted to the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven (8: 1). The exaltation of Jesus, indeed, overshadows His resurrection in this Epistle; but precisely because at the same time it presupposes it, those who believe in Him can be described as already 'partakers of a heavenly calling' (3:1), and even μέτοχοι τοῦ χριστοῦ (3:14). It is the fact that Christ, the fore-

runner on our behalf (6:20), has entered into the very presence of God for us (9:24), which forms the ground of the worshipper's confidence (10:22) and of the writer's exhortation. 'Let us', he concludes, 'draw near.' And again, since human death is to be followed by divine judgment, and the death of Christ by His *parousia* in glory and the final judgment (9:27f.), what other reaction can be ours, the writer seems to say, than that of complete identification with the great Shepherd of the sheep (13:20), who has made entry into true 'rest' possible? Still with the priestly pattern in mind, therefore, he is able to conclude with a note of challenge which seems to contradict the movement of the previous exhortation, but in fact completes it: 'Therefore let us go forth.' (13:13).

The author of this Epistle is 'intensely concerned', as Professor C. F. D. Moule says in his book *The Sacrifice of Christ* (1956), 'with the finality of the work of God in Christ.' But there is also a very real sense in which God's work of reconciliation in Christ becomes, on the basis of its once-for-all achievement, a 'standing intercession'. The redemptive efficacy of the Atonement, in other words, remains continually active; and I for one would hesitate to limit the meaning of ἐντυγχάνειν (7:25) simply to the area suggested by the activity of the Spirit in Romans 8:26, where the same word occurs. Indeed, as Sanday and Headlam point out in their commentary on that verse in *Romans*, the original sense of the word is of the most inclusive nature, so that with Westcott we may construe the phrase as meaning 'human needs of every kind find interpretation by the Spirit and effective advocacy by Christ'.

And lest any should feel that I am here laying myself open to inroads of all kinds of eucharistic misunderstanding, let me boldly declare with a protestant fervour for which I have equally the support of the Vice-Principal of Oak Hill and the Lady Margaret's Professor in this University, that the nature of the τελείωσις of priesthood and reconciliation in Christ is such as will strictly preclude any kind of repetitive self-offering. What then is offered at the hands of our interceding High Priest? It is, surely, in the language of the 1662 prayer of oblation, 'the benefits of his passion.' And it is because the

offering is by nature manward and not Godward (except in so far as the activity of pleading an accomplished offering constitutes an offering), that we as members of the Body of Christ can more easily see the Eucharist as the focus of our acceptance of God's verdict on sin, and of God's acceptance of Christ's work of atonement on our behalf.

We may therefore accept the eschatological perspective of C. K. Barrett which we noticed at the outset, and see that in Christ as Victor and Son 'the eternal redemption has already been wrought, but awaits complete application and fulfilment'. There is a very real sense in which the fact and the meaning of atonement belong together.

From our study of the Atonement in the Epistle to the Hebrews, may I be allowed to draw two practical conclusions? Extensively, we are provided in this Epistle with a theology for the practice of evangelism which is timeless and crucial precisely because of its ultimate expression of the finished and continuing work of Christ. 'Let us draw near . . . let us go forth.' Here we are given *par excellence* a study of the intellectual basis and moral incentive of the Church's mission. By this we may live, and upon this we must act. Secondly and intensively, the presentation in *Hebrews* of the ministry of Christ, seen from ceaseless number of theological and chronological points of view, remains, in Dr. Vincent Taylor's words, 'a theme for adoring meditation'. In the face of this unchanging and unchangeable priesthood, we have entered upon holy ground and are silenced. *Numen adest*. God in all His righteousness and mercy is present, to whom are outstretched in standing intercession the nail-pieced hands of His exalted and victorious Son. Willingly therefore shall we sing, in the words of that same hymn by Charles Wesley:

‘See, He lifts His hands above,  
See, He shows His prints of love;  
Hark, His gracious lips bestow  
Blessings on His Church below:  
Alleluia!’